

“But He/She Cheated on Me!”

Minor Prophets, Major Implications – sermon #1

Hosea 1:2-11

If I asked you, what are your favorite books in the bible, what would you say? What are the stories we read, the places we go for inspiration? The Gospels. Genesis. Exodus. Psalms. Personally, the Pastoral Letters of Paul are my favorite.

One section that probably is not in our top ten is called the “Minor Prophets.” That is actually a bad name. They are not minor books, they are only shorter than books like Isaiah and Jeremiah. Properly, the Book of the Twelve, starting with Hosea and ending with Malachi, are a group of prophetic writings that have much to say to us about God and ourselves. Probably the reason we don’t go to them as often as the other parts of the Bible is simply that these books are difficult to read and often contain prophecies concerning countries that no longer exist. It’s hard to read them in our contemporary culture.

But the Book of Twelve are part of our Bible, and Jesus himself read them. These books help us explore characteristics of God that seem to be in tension. For example, God’s love is unconditional and redemptive, and yet God expects faithfulness and obedience. With the help of the Minor Prophets, we can see a more complete picture of God, not just one side.

For the next twelve Sundays, we will examine these books, one at a time, and find out what they say about God, and what they say about ourselves. Let me warn you in advance, the prophets’ messages are not always pretty. In fact, we are starting this series with Hosea, a beloved and perplexing, and explicit book.

The story of Hosea is that God asks the prophet to marry a prostitute. That is odd, to say the least, and probably not expected if you haven’t read much of

the Bible. But allow me to be perfectly frank. Sexuality in the Bible is not tidy and clean; the stories in the Bible actually reflect the condition of the world. As much as we long for healthy marriages, celibacy, integrity, and purity, there is rape, prostitution, adultery in our world, and also in the Bible. Read about Judah and Tamar, Joseph and Potiphar’s wife, Samson and Delilah, David and Bathsheba. These are tricky stories for pastors, and often we avoid preaching on them. But these stories are included in the Bible for a reason. We don’t live in a perfect world, and that makes the Bible even more powerful: the Bible tells it like it is, while offering a solution.

So, what would you do if God told you to marry a prostitute? What would you say if God said, “I want you to marry the most unfaithful person you can find. Go and marry a cheater.” Crazy, right? Why would God possibly ask someone to do this?

That’s the thing about prophets. They always take God’s message seriously. They don’t question it, even if they don’t see the big picture right away. God often uses a prophet’s action symbolically. For example, Isaiah walked naked for three years (Isaiah 20:1-6); Jeremiah was told not to marry or have children (Jeremiah 16:1-4); Ezekiel was told to lie on his left side for 390 days and then on his right side for forty days (Ezekiel 4:4-8).¹ These were strange actions, which is what made them, and the messages they conveyed, memorable.

This command for Hosea to marry an unfaithful woman and have children with her is part of a bigger message God wants to tell God’s people. If we call ourselves God’s people today, then we need to read Hosea with the attention God expected Israel to have. This message is not just for them, it is also for us.

¹ Hosea, Abingdon Press Old Testament Commentary, Chapter 2. (accessed through www.ministrymatters.com)

Hosea was preaching to the northern kingdom in the eighth century, B.C., when Assyria threaten to conquer Israel. This message came at a time when the northern kingdom was a mess. They had awful kings. They practiced idolatry. Israel wanted to worship more than one god, just in case that helped them be prosperous. In a way, this made sense. The Israelites were not great at farming. They saw that their Canaanite neighbors had great crops, so maybe they thought, “Hey, maybe we can worship their gods and get the same results.” So they worshiped the Baals, the foreign fertility gods. This worship, frankly, was lewd. It not only involved idols, it also involved cultic prostitution. Like I said, the Bible is pretty gross at times.

Hosea speaks God’s word into this mess, and I’m willing to bet his words were not popular. But the Israelites needed more than just a reprimand. They needed an example of God’s love and passion.

God gave Hosea four commands. First, in Hosea 1:2, God tells the prophet to marry an adulterous wife. Why? Because the same way that Hosea’s wife acted was how Israel behaved with God. They practiced idolatry instead of faithfulness to God.

Second, when Hosea and his wife Gomer have a son, God tells Hosea to call him, “Jezreel.” Jezreel was the site of the overthrow of King Ahab and the death of his queen, Jezebel – bad characters. Jezreel is equivalent of “Waterloo” or “Battle of the Big Horn.” Not really a name with a great reputation.

God’s third command is to name Hosea’s next child “Lo-Ruhamah,” which means, “Not Loved.” God explains that Israel will no longer be the recipient of God’s love. Finally, God tells Hosea to name his last son, “Lo-Ammi,” which means, not my people. Wow. Great names, right?

What is going on? Essentially, God and Israel are having a tiff, a lovers' spat. God is trying to show the Israelites that love, true love, is not a free-for-all. They cannot call themselves God's people when they do not act like God's people. What Hosea shows us is an unfiltered glimpse of God's passion for the people he loves. If they choose to reject his commands, they suffer the consequences. In short, God is a jealous God.

Now, that probably sounds like bad news. Maybe it is. We don't want to live in a world where we are confronted with our sin and God's judgment, and have to pay the penalty of our wrongs. But the purpose of a prophet is to speak God's truth. We cannot escape the effects of our sin. When we reject God, God is hurt. Who wouldn't be?

There is a major difference, however, between our reaction and God's reaction. What do we do when we are hurt and rejected? We get bitter. We get angry. “That so-and-so good-for-nothing cheater! I'll show him!” It doesn't have to be a lover or spouse; it can be a friend, a family member, a brother or sister. The closer the person is to you, the worse the rejection feels, and the stronger the desire is to get revenge, or at least hold a grudge. That is our natural reaction.

But, thankfully, that is not God's reaction. God's discipline is always instructive, always redemptive. God may allow us to feel the consequences of our sin, but God also works to redeem us. This is the point of Hosea. While Gomer was a prostitute, Hosea married her. Even though Israel rejected God, God still sought a relationship with them. And instead of waiting for Israel to get cleaned up and figure it out on her own, God took the first step to reconcile.

Chapter 2 in Hosea describes many consequences of Israel's sin. Her protection is lost. She thirsts in the desert. She seems to have no friends. But

then God promises relief, starting in verse 14. “Therefore, I am now going to allure her; I will lead her into the desert and speak tenderly to her.” God promises that Israel will again call God “my husband” (verse 16). Israel will be betrothed in righteousness and justice, in love and compassion. (verse 20). A restoration will occur.

Let’s read a little more in Chapter 3.

The LORD said to me, “Go, show your love to your wife again, though she is loved by another man and is an adulteress. Love her as the LORD loves the Israelites, though they turn to other gods and love the sacred raisin cakes.”

²So I bought her for fifteen shekels of silver and about a homer and a lethek of barley. ³Then I told her, “You are to live with me many days; you must not be a prostitute or be intimate with any man, and I will behave the same way toward you.”

⁴For the Israelites will live many days without king or prince, without sacrifice or sacred stones, without ephod or household gods. ⁵Afterward the Israelites will return and seek the LORD their God and David their king. They will come trembling to the LORD and to his blessings in the last days.

God’s commitment to Israel is unshakable. Even though Israel cheated on God, God rescued her. God works through repentance to restore Israel.

Historically, we know this took quite some time. Israel was exiled; so was the southern kingdom of Judah. But God never abandoned them permanently. God did not hold a grudge. God worked to redeem, no matter how long it took.

Human love is messy. Divine love is even messier. One of my commentaries says, “Hosea is one of the places in the Bible where the feelings, passion, and emotion of God are prominent. The God of Hosea is not unaffected by what people do. Like a betrayed husband, God, too, feels betrayal, hurt, anger,

and, finally, love. Love is a very important word to describe Hosea’s God. God loves even the unfaithful one. And God wants to be loved.”²

Is it strange to think that God wants to be loved? Does that make God vulnerable? I do not think so. I think this makes God very real. Why else would the Lord of Creation send his own Son into the world to die for us sinners? God wants our love. God loves us unconditionally. This must be true, because we are a total wreck. In my heart, I know I am no better than a prostitute. I am selfish, weak, easily angered. If God treated other people the way I am prone to, we would be in a bigger mess than we already are, don’t you agree? But God is perfect, and God’s love goes to every length to redeem us. Does God judge? Yes. Does God love unconditionally? Yes. The book of Hosea shows how those two characteristics work together. A vindictive God would never go and redeem an adulterer. And a passive God wouldn’t care. Thankfully the God of the Bible, the God of Hosea, is a wise, just, passionate, and unconditional lover of people.

The question for us is, will we be honest with God? Will we look at our own lives and confess our deep need for grace? Will we stop pretending to be perfect? Will we stop pretending that our actions don’t matter to God? Idolatry is alive and well in our world today. Anything that replaces God at the center of our lives corrupts us. You know what they are, those things that entice you. You know where you spend your time, your money, your thoughts. Those are our idols. But God has something much better for all of us. God wants to heal our broken hearts so that we no longer run after the empty pleasures that corrupt us.

Hosea’s book reflects the same truth we read in Romans 5:8. “But God demonstrates his own love for us, that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for

² Ibid.

us.” Know this truth today, church. No matter what you have done, God will work to redeem you. Hosea says that to all of us. We are beloved. We are purchased and brought back into God’s loving arms. If you do not know that truth, you can pray right now for God to redeem you.

PRAYER

Memory Verse: Hosea 2:19

“I will betroth you in righteousness and justice, in love and compassion.”

Reflection Questions:

1. Have you ever been cheated on? What did it feel like? What did you want to do to that person?
2. How is Hosea’s marriage an illustration for God’s relationship with Israel? With us?
3. How does sin affect us? How does God allow us to feel the consequences of our sin?
4. How does God work to redeem us from sin?
5. Have you thought of God as a jealous lover of your soul? Do you know His love in Christ Jesus?